



## **A Painted Spondylus Shell from Burial 1-9, Pacbitun, Belize**

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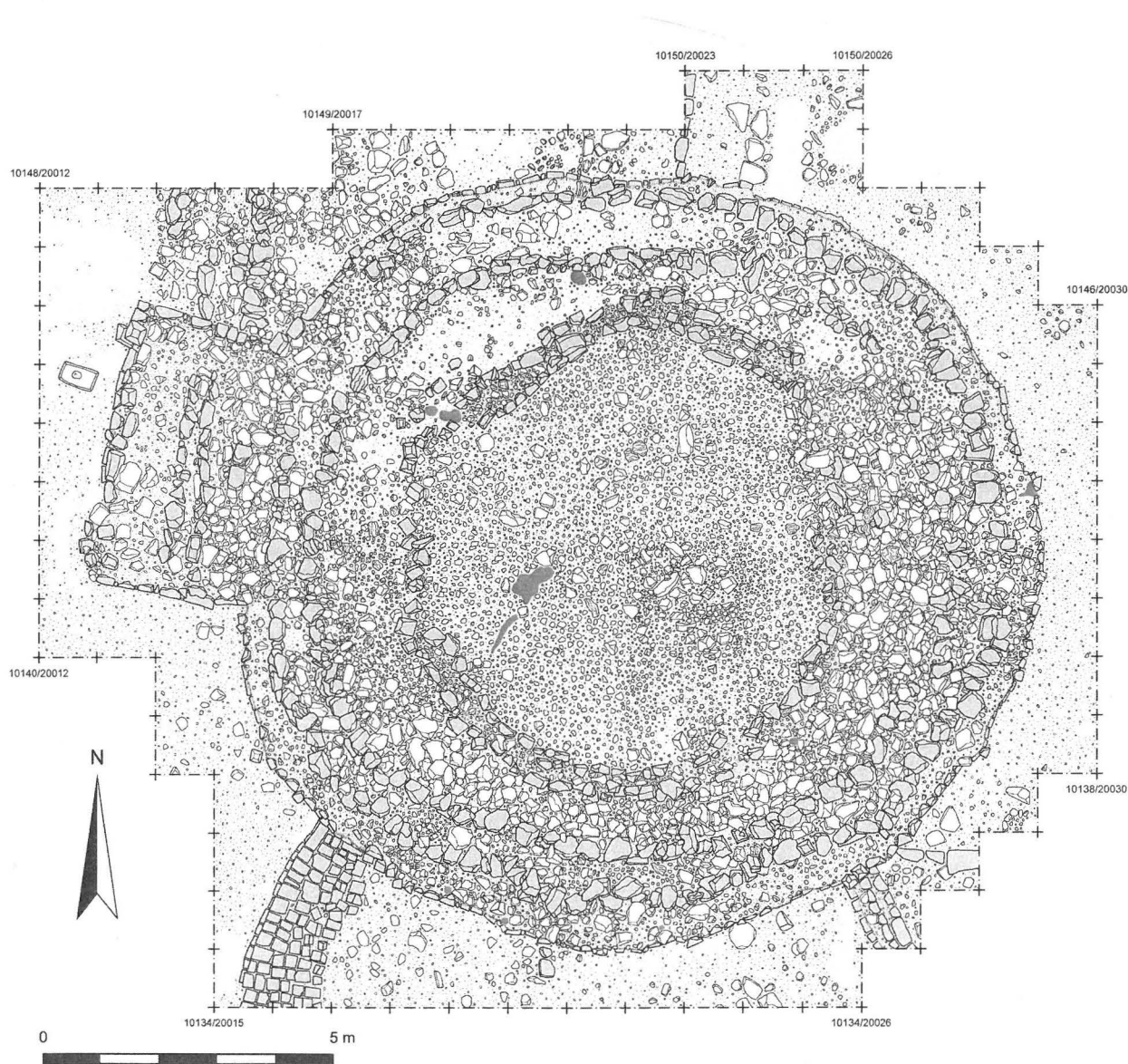
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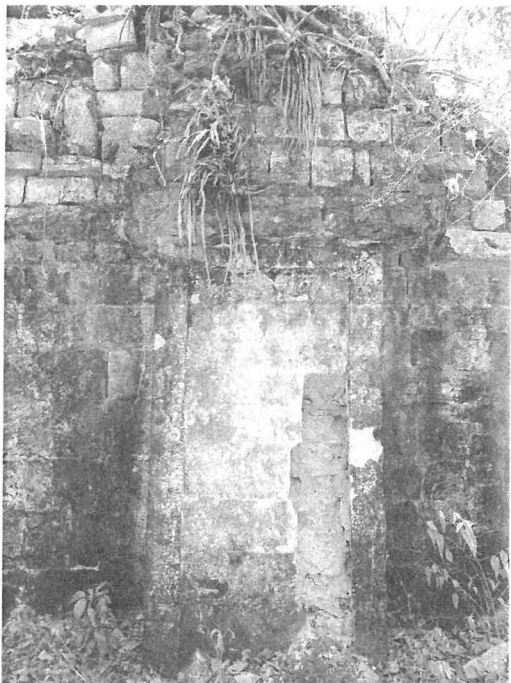


Fig. 11. Partly looted recessed plain panel, western part of main façade, Structure 2. Photo: Eduardo González Arce, 2015.

site, the lack of excavations, and the condition of the buildings, an affiliation of El Delfin to either the Chenes or the Rio Bec style could not be established. Nevertheless, it is possible to say that without doubt the site belongs to the Late Maya Classic (AD. 600 – AD. 900).

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Fig. 12. Upper façade, western part of main façade, Structure 2. Photo: Stephan Merk, 2015.



Fig. 13. Remaining part of the vault in Room 2, Structure 2. Please also notice the niche in the walled part between the western doorway column and the western doorjamb in the lower right corner of the picture. Photo: Eduardo González Arce, 2015.

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#### **A Painted *Spondylus* Shell from Burial 1-9, Pacbitun, Belize**

COPENHAGEN (Christophe Helmke), SANTA FE (Kong F. Cheong), PETERBOROUGH (Paul F. Healy), LONDON (Mads S. Jørgensen). Between 1984 and 1987, a Trent University project, under the direction of Paul F. Healy, excavated the Maya site of Pacbitun, located in the Cayo District of Belize (Healy 1990; Healy et al. 2004b). During the final season, the team excavated a trench into Structure 1, the tallest pyramidal structure at the site, and the central temple of the eastern triadic complex that dominates the site's principal Plaza A (Figure 1). This trench uncovered Burial 1-9, the only vaulted tomb discovered at the site, which contained

a wealth of grave offerings, including the valve of a spiny oyster shell (*Spondylus* sp.). Whereas this shell has already figured in foregoing reports (i.e. Healy 1990: 257; Healy et al. 2004a: 231, Fig. 14.3b; Wagner 2009: 60, 63, 223, Fig. C-11, Table 5.5), the painted design that embellishes this shell has escaped proper identification and commentary. In this research note we present a new drawing of the shell and discuss its design.

### Archaeological context

The tomb designated as BU 1-9 was located almost 5 m below the terminal, axial stair, deep within the core of Structure 1. The tomb was built in the first portion of Phase 4 (of five major architectural phases at Pacbitun) that is more or less equivalent to the Coc ceramic phase, which corresponds to AD 550–700. This was a time of major architectural renewal

of Structure 1, the most imposing building of Plaza A in the site epicentre. The large vaulted masonry tomb was about 3 m long, 1 m wide, and 1.2 m high, and represents a major undertaking in terms of labour investment. The burial was covered by a thick (8–10 cm) layer of thousands of chert flakes intentionally struck from cores and spread across 16 large, flat, carefully trimmed slate capstones. The grave contained the remains of a tall (170 cm), adult (45+/- 5 years) male, lying supine (Figure 2). The head was positioned to the south, typical of the Belize valley, and face up (see Welsh 1988: 52–63, 226–227). The skeletal remains, both head and torso, were covered in red cinnabar, considered a royal mortuary trait (e.g. Chase 1992: 36–37). Accompanying him was one of the

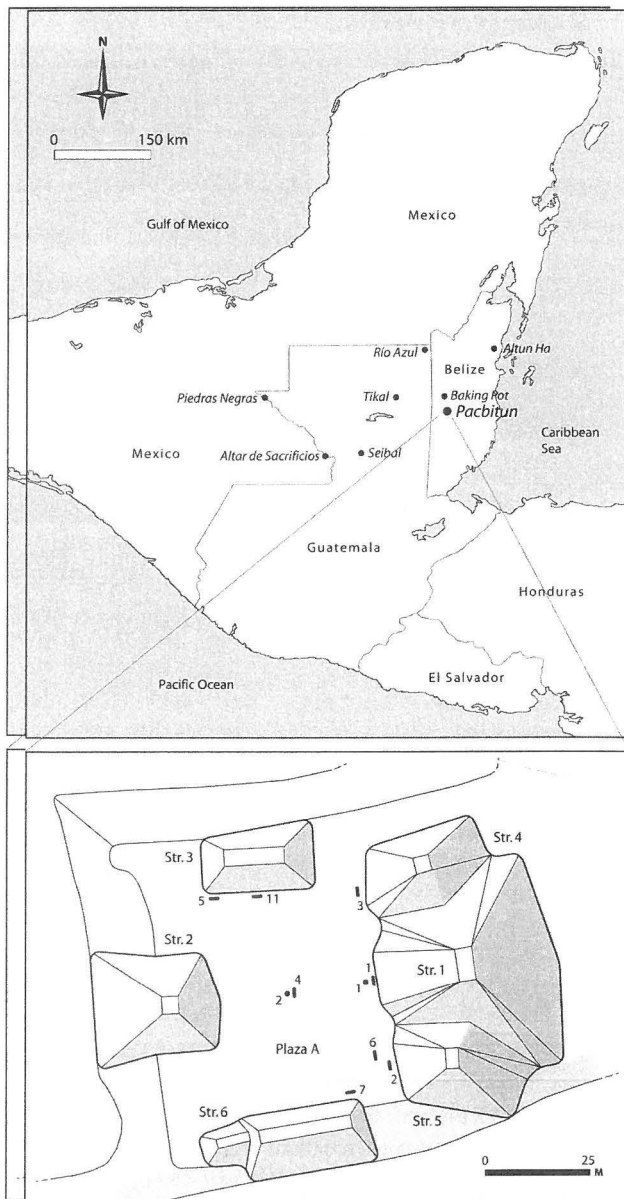


Fig. 1. Map of the Maya area showing the location of Pacbitun and other archaeological sites mentioned in the text. The inset shows a plan of Plaza A at Pacbitun. Note the location of Structure 1 – containing Burial 1-9 – the central structure of the eastern triadic complex (map and plan after Helmke et al. 2006: Figs. 1 & 3).

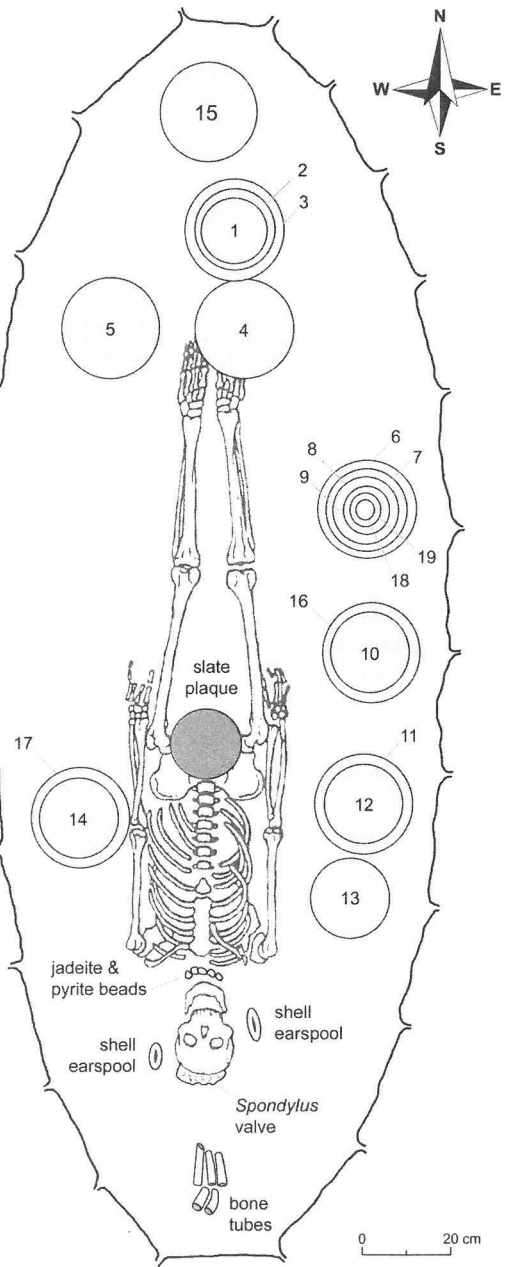


Fig. 2. Plan of Burial 1-9 at Pacbitun showing the skeletal remains of an adult male and associated burial furniture. Note the many nested ceramic vessels, the slate mirror backing, the bone tubes, the items of personal adornment and the *Spondylus* valve capping the cranium (plan by Christophe Helmke, based on Healy et al. 2004a: Fig. 14.1).



richest arrays of artefacts encountered at Pacbitun. The burial furniture consisted of 19 slipped vessels, many complete, about one quarter of which were polychromes, the remainder being monochromes of black or brown-black colouring. The vessels represent a striking variety of forms: 10 bowls, 4 dishes, 2 vases, 2 pitchers, and 1 jar, many stacked inside others. Additional mortuary offerings included polished stone jewellery (3 jade beads and 1 pyrite tube), a matching pair of circular shell earspools, five hollow bone tubes, and a drilled circular slate backing for a mosaic mirror (the pyrite *tesserae* having corroded away) (Healy and Blainey 2011; Healy et al. 2008). Of special interest for the present study is a large marine valve with a design, painted on the interior surface. The *Spondylus* valve, was positioned at the back of the head, like a skull cap. Burials containing similar marine shell “skull caps” have been identified from royal burials at

Altar de Sacrificios (Smith 1972: 259–260), Piedras Negras (Coe 1959: 56, Fig. 64), Tikal (Hellmuth 1967: 195, Photo 90; Moholy-Nagy 1985: 149; Moholy-Nagy and Coe 2008: 59), Río Azul (Hall 1989: 63, 142), Altun Ha (Pendergast 1982: 100; Fig 57), and Baking Pot (Helmke 2008: 139, Fig. 17), suggesting that the custom is a shared royal mortuary practice of the Lowland Maya in the Classic Period. Although these shell “skull caps” are superficially reminiscent of the practice of covering skulls with ceramic vessels or *metates*, the latter were clearly intended to protect the skull, a function that cannot be assigned to the shell specimens on account of their size and placement. Based on the shell “skull cap”, in conjunction with the large size and prominent location of the tomb, as well as the richness of the grave offerings, it has been argued that BU 1-9 contained the remains of a Late Classic ruler of Pacbitun (Healy et al. 2004a: 235).

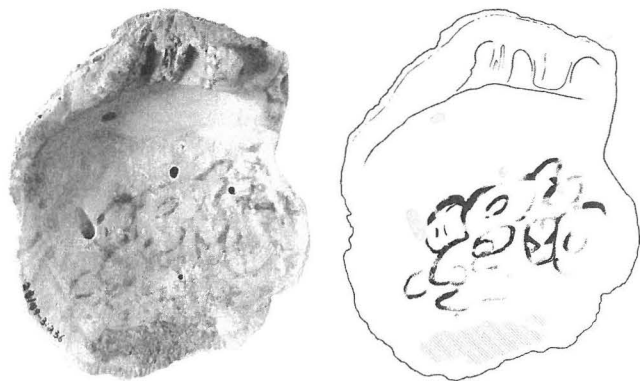


Fig. 3. The *Spondylus* valve showing the eroded design on its interior surface. Hatching indicates the extent of the cinnabar adhering to the shell (photograph by Kong F. Cheong; drawing by Christophe Helmke).

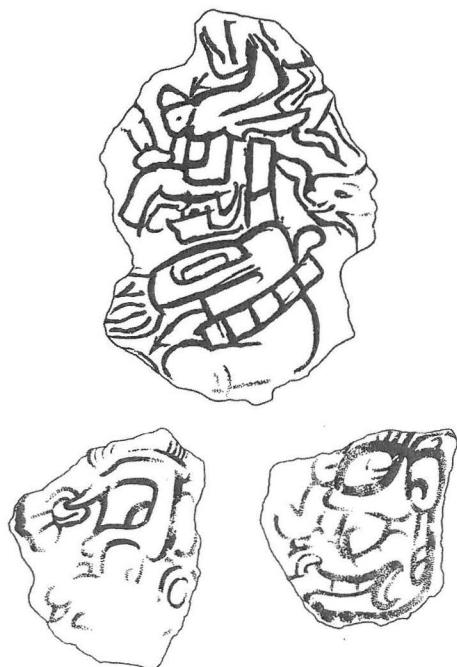


Fig. 4. Examples of an incised obsidian from Tikal (top) and two painted lithics from Piedras Negras (below) (drawings by Christophe Helmke, based on a photograph in Moholy-Nagy and Coe 2008: Fig. 52a and multispectral photographs in Hruby and Ware 2009: Fig. 7).

### The *Spondylus* shell valve

The shell has been identified as an Atlantic spiny oyster shell (*Spondylus americanus*), and measures approximately 12,2 cm long by 9,9 cm high (Figure 3a). As such the shell is a fairly large specimen, since *S. americanus* typically reach a maximal size of c. 10 cm in diameter (Rosenberg 1992: 142). Although parts of its edges have deteriorated, the extant hinge and beak indicate that this is a left valve. Its interior, or ventral, surface was decorated by a design rendered in black pigment. Prior to the application of the design, the orange porcellaneous interior was intentionally scraped to produce a smooth surface. The practice of altering shells by means of scraping and polishing is commonplace in the Maya Lowlands (Hammond et al. 1991: 362; Moholy-Nagy and Coe 2008: 59), although both worked and unworked shells appear in burial contexts with great frequency. What truly sets this particular specimen apart is the painted design (Figure 3b). Unfortunately, it is now partially eroded and is concealed in parts by a significant coat of calcium carbonate, which undoubtedly formed post-depositionally within the tomb. In addition, the design is hidden along the ventral margin by red pigment, traces of the cinnabar that had also been liberally sprinkled on the skeleton. Our photographs of the shell and examination of the original have allowed us to produce a new drawing and to identify the design. It represents the head of the Sun god (God G) in profile, his characteristic traits still clearly visible. These include the tuft of hair on the forehead, his Roman nose and the nose bead, the raised upper lip, and his squared esotropic eyes (Schele and Miller 1986: 50; Taube 1992: 50–52). The Sun god is also shown wearing a large earspool with parts of the upper scrolled knot still discernible. The glyphic texts relate that this deity was known as *K'inich Ajaw* ‘radiant lord’, and corroborating this identification is the **K'IN** ‘sun’ logogram that embellishes the cheek of the Sun god rendered on the shell, a diagnostic trait shared by almost all other known examples of Maya text and imagery. Unfortunately, the lower portion of the design is now no longer visible, but we presume that the deity’s typical T-shaped filed incisors and the resorbed lower jaw were also once represented. The overall style of the design is in keeping with the ceramic dating of the tomb, attributed to the earlier facet of the Late Classic.

## Interpretations and Comparisons

Although the specific function of this shell remains difficult to ascertain, its context and decoration as well as the occurrence of analogous shells in other burials across the Lowlands, suggest that this object played an integral part in funeral rites. The pairing of this and other shells with the skull intimate that it might be tied somehow with the identity of the deceased, the head being the primary locus of identity in Mesoamerican cultures (Houston et al. 2006: 60–68). If this is indeed the case we might conclude that part of this individual's name involved *K'inich*, the theonym of the solar deity. Whether this was part of his accession name, or as a type of honorific (Colas 2003; see Stuart 2005: 121, Fig. 91, for an alternate interpretation), is unknown. An even more attractive possibility is that this involves the post-mortem name of the royal deceased, even though the clearest examples of such names involve specific manifestations of the thunder and lightning deities *Chaa'k* (God B) and *K'awiil* (God K) as well as *Ajan* (God E), the youthful aspect of the Maize god (Colas 2009). This being said, the shell does not spell out a complete regnal name, but only depicts the head of the solar deity. There are, in fact, many examples of objects from both burials and caches that depict a variety of supernatural entities. These include the well-known incised obsidians, such as those of Tikal that depict *K'awiil*, the Jester god, the Moon goddess, and aptly enough, the Sun god, *K'inich* (Moholy-Nagy and Coe 2008: Figs. 42–56) (Figure 4a). Similarly incised pieces of jadeite and shell are known from Piedras Negras (Hruby and Ware 2009). Most to the case at hand, however, are the painted lithics from Piedras Negras (Figure 4b), which were described in a remarkable study by Zachary Hruby and Gene Ware (2009; see also Moholy-Nagy and Coe 2008: Figs. 16d & 135d). What all of these examples have in common is that they represent individual deities, rendered either in full-form or just in profile. The material and media in which these examples were executed is variable, although we should note these depictions occur predominantly on rare and exotic raw materials that were imported to the Lowlands, including prized jadeite, exotic marine shell and obsidian. As such the Pacbitun shell appears to be an additional example of the same ritual practice documented elsewhere, wherein supernatural entities were invoked and made manifest only to be committed to the earth, within ritual deposits. Nevertheless, as far as we can ascertain, the Pacbitun shell is among the very few examples of painted *Spondylus* shells and, here too, it is distinguished by its context, paired with the skull of the deceased. We anticipate that additional examples will help us to better comprehend this intriguing, but as yet poorly understood, funerary practice.

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## A New Terminal Classic Carved Altar from Caracol, Belize

Arlen F. Chase and Diane Z. Chase

Even after 31 years of continuous research at the site of Caracol, Belize, there are still new and amazing finds made. In January of 2015, the project was made aware of the existence of a new carved monument in the site epicenter. This monument was located immediately west of the project camp on the summit of Structure A13. Structure A13 had been carefully cleaned of leaves and low brush and its summit mapped and archaeologically tested during the 2002 field season. These investigations had resulted in the recording of three low substructures on the summit of A13 and an axial penetration of the central substructure that yielded 1 lidded barrel and 1 lip-to-lip set of cache vessels dating to the later part of the Early Classic Period. What the 2002 investigations had not

located was a small carved monument located immediately south of the southern line-of-stone substructure on the summit because it was buried beneath the humus.

We were made aware of the possibility of a new Caracol monument by Jaime Awe in late January. He emailed several cell phone pictures of the eroded monument taken by tour guide Jorge De Leon. These initial pictures were in full sunlight and did not show the full detail of the monument. From them, we could make out 2 figures and the presence of a hieroglyphic text that appeared to open with the date of 8 Ahau 8 Mol, which we took to be the calendar round date of 10.2.15.0.0 or A.D. 884. If confirmed, this date would add some 25 years to the epigraphic history of Caracol (Chase et al. 1991; Grube 1994; Helmke 2006; Houston 1987, 1991; Martin and Grube 2000) and provide one of the latest known dates in the Southern lowlands – and certainly the latest known date in Belize.

The new Caracol altar was “found” on Structure A13 during the first day of the 31<sup>st</sup> field season of the Caracol Archaeological Project (2015 blog at <http://www.caracol.org>). The monument had clearly been moved from its original location and was laid out on the ground in two major pieces adjacent to a disturbed and refilled area that we took to have been the excavation that recovered it. The altar was missing a small piece of its carved design in the headdress area of the left figure. Formal excavation of the disturbed area recovered the missing carved piece of the monument as well as half a dozen pieces of shaped stone that fit the outer edges of the altar, making it slightly more oval in appearance than is indicated in the photographs as well as confirming the original altar location.

Caracol Altar 26 (Figures 1 and 2) measures 73.6 cm in height by 63.6 cm in width and is only 12.5 to 13.5 cm thick. Its maximum carving depth is 1.2 cm. Most other small altars and ballcourt markers from Caracol were much thicker with rounded bottoms that would have been embedded in plastered floors. The iconography on Caracol Altar 26 is consistent with the Terminal Classic iconography found elsewhere at the site on its late monuments. Caracol’s Terminal Classic monuments were re-established at the site after being de-emphasized during the late Late Classic Period (D. Chase and A. Chase 2008). Two general iconographic themes prevailed during the Terminal Classic era at Caracol. One pairs two prisoners opposite each other, as on Caracol Altar 23 dating to 9.18.10.0.0 or A.D. 800 and Caracol Altar 22 dating to 9.19.0.0.0 or A.D. 810. A second prominent theme pairs two individuals facing each other; in each case the individual on the right has an arm across their chest in a gesture of friendship or submission (A. Chase 1985; A. Chase et al. 1991). This pose is found on Caracol Altars 12 (dates to 9.19.10.0.0) 13 (9.19.10.0.0) and the prophetic 10 (10.0.0.0.0), and 10 (10.0.19.6.14) as well as on Caracol Stela 17 (10.1.0.0.0) and Cahal Pichik Altar 2 (10.0.5.0.0). The new altar also contains a similar set of paired individuals with the individual on the right having their arm across their chest. On Altar 12, the Caracol ruler makes such a gesture and is paired with an individual from Ucanal (Grube 1994:6). Caracol monuments Stela 17, Altar 12, and Cahal Pichik Altar 2 all name the same Caracol individual, *Tum(n)-ol*. On Stela 17, the individual on the right making a gesture of submission is probably a secondary elite individual who lived in Caracol’s